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SUBJECT: THAILAND: CABINET RESHUFFLE AS CENSURE DEBATE AND
MORE RED SHIRT PROTESTS LOOM ON HORIZON

REF: A. 09 BANGKOK 2642 (CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENTS
UNCERTAIN)

[1](#)B. 09 BANGKOK 2459 (CHARTER CHANGE ONE STEP CLOSER)

[1](#)C. 08 BANGKOK 3712 (NEW THAI CABINET APPOINTED)

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This cable is Sensitive But Unclassified. Please handle
appropriately.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: After months of speculation, Prime Minister
Abhisit Vejjajiva seems set to initiate a minor government
reshuffle of Democrat Party figures slightly more than a year
after taking office in late December 2008. In the wake of
Public Health Minister Witthaya Kaewparadai's resignation in
the face of allegations of planned procurement
irregularities, Witthaya will be replaced by Education
Minister Jurin Laksanavisit, who will in turn be replaced by
chief government whip Chinnaworn Bunyakiat. Witthaya will
then replace Chinnaworn as government whip. In addition, the
DPM for Economic Affairs -- Democrat Korbsak Sapavasus -- will
fill the vacant slot of Secretary General for Prime Minister
Abhisit, while veteran Democrat MP Trairong Suwannakhiri is
slated to take Korbsak's place as DPM.

[1](#)2. (SBU) The planned reshuffle is not as comprehensive as
some would have hoped, however, particularly in view of
Deputy Public Health Minister and Phumjai Thai member Manit
Nopamornbordee's refusal to resign in the face of the same
allegations of procurement irregularities that toppled the
Public Health Minister. The timing of the cabinet moves is
important, given the looming censure debate in Parliament, as
well as the promise of renewed red-shirt rallies in the next
two months with the stated goal of bringing down this
government. Further complicating matters for the PM, Abhisit
must also deal with renewed calls for charter change from the
Democrat Party's junior coalition partners.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Comment: The MoPH portfolio is important to the USG
because of compulsory licensing issues, the ongoing
negotiation of the CDC operating agreement, and the extensive
MoPH involvement with Mission Bangkok, one fourth of whose
employees work on bilateral and regional health
collaboration. New MoPH Minister Jurin is now Deputy Chief
of the Democratic Party; his former posts include Deputy
Minister of Commerce and then Agriculture, and Minister to
the PM. Like former Minister Witthaya, Jurin is not a health

professional; unlike Witthaya, who had no public health experience whatsoever, Jurin was Secretary-General to the MoPH Minister in 1988. Witthaya was distrusted by the press and many citizens who said he misled the public on the H1N1 epidemic; Jurin may avoid this problem with his experience as Democratic Party spokesman and a reputation for being straight-talking and transparent. Jurin was an IVP participant in 1989.

¶4. (SBU) Comment, cont: Annual cabinet reshuffles are common for Thailand's coalition governments, and coalition partners are generally given wide latitude to adjust their ministry allotments as they see fit. Given the opposition Puea Thai party's plans for a no-confidence vote later this month, however, PM Abhisit must tread even more carefully than usual while also contending with junior coalition partners seeking to leverage the uncertainty for a bigger piece of the cabinet pie. The net impact of the likely changes will probably be minimal; less certain is the impact of red protests, with the main push now expected for February. End Summary and Comment.

RESHUFFLE FINALLY COMES TO A HEAD

¶5. (U) After months of cabinet reshuffle chatter, the Minister of Public Health made the first move with his December 29 resignation. From the moment the coalition cabinet was cobbled together in December 2008, opponents attacked PM Abhisit's government and called for the replacement of some key individuals, most notably Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, but the coalition survived its first year with only one minor minister change (REF C).

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¶6. (U) Democrat Witthaya Kaewparadai resigned after an independent panel named him and ten others in connection with budget irregularities and flawed management of 86 billion baht in the Thai Khemkhaeng ("Thailand: Investing from Strength to Strength") program; a rural doctor activist had blown the whistle on the planned procurement irregularities before they actually occurred. On January 6, PM Abhisit announced that Education Minister Jurin would replace Witthaya, with government whip Chinnaworn Bunyakiat moving into Jurin's slot at the Education Ministry, and Witthaya moving into the whip job. Abhisit said that the only other change to his cabinet would be the appointment of Democrat MP Trairong Suwannakhiri to replace DPM for Economic Affairs Korbak Sapavasut, who had long been tabbed to serve as PM Secretary General, filling the void created by Nipon Promphan's resignation several months earlier.

PHUMJAI THAI DIGGING ITS HEELS IN

¶7. (U) Key deputy coalition partner Phumjai Thai has long appeared content with its position within the coalition. Deputy government spokesman and party heavyweight Suphachai Jaisamut told reporters in December that Phumjai Thai (PJT) ministers would remain in place in any reshuffle. PJT recently came under fire, however, when the same panel that implicated Minister of Public Health Witthaya also named Deputy Minister of Public Health Manit Nopamornbodi, prompting public calls for Manit's resignation. PM Abhisit refused to sack Manit, claiming it was an internal PJT decision. PJT executives on January 5 signaled support for Manit, who vowed to clear his name and said he would only resign if the National Counter Corruption Commission found him guilty.

UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THAI COALITIONS

¶8. (SBU) Thailand's tradition of fractious multi-party coalitions, aside from the Thaksin era from 2001-2006, has

led to some unusual dynamics in coalition management. Pre-coalition negotiations determine specific ministerial portfolio allocations between parties when the government is formed, with the PM usually unable to influence the composition of ministers outside his own party. Each party reserves the right to change the composition of "their" slots based on its own standards/criteria, and often faces pressures between different factions within a party to allow for "rotations" between key faction figures. Even in Thaksin's era, such reshuffles occurred almost annually.

¶9. (U) An interesting window into Thai re-shuffle dynamics played out in public view in early December 2009 when Deputy Prime Minister Sanan Khachornprasart, currently affiliated with the Chart Thai Pattana (CTP) party, said he wanted to resign to make way for his son, Siriwat, an MP representing Phichit Province. Government opponents quickly cried foul and leveled accusations of blatant nepotism, charging that Sanan was perpetuating politics-as-usual. The furor eventually petered out as the CTP remained quiet; Abhisit brought the matter to a close on January 4 when he announced that he had asked Sanan, a former Democrat Party Secretary General, to remain in his position.

¶10. (U) Another potential cabinet move looms: Deputy Finance Minister Pruttichai Damrongrat from the Puea Pandin Party could eventually lose his position following the Election Commission's decision to petition the Constitutional Court to disqualify Pruttichai for violating a Constitutional provision barring ministers from holding a significant stake in private companies. If a decision comes down prior to the end of this government, there would be every expectation that Puea Pandin would exercise its right to name a replacement.

PILING ON: PARTNERS DEMAND CHARTER CHANGE

¶11. (U) Adding to the expected pressure from the opposition Puea Thai and UDD, Abhisit faces renewed demands from junior

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coalition partners to amend the constitution. CTP senior member Somsak Prissananthakul said the party would focus on amending articles dealing with electoral constituencies and international treaties (REF B). PJT leader and Interior Minister Chaovarat Chanvirakul publicly stated that if the Democrat Party did not take immediate steps to amend the constitution then his party would consider joining with the opposition Puea Thai to press for the amendments. Meanwhile Puea Thai remained firm in its opposition to amending the 2007 charter piecemeal and continued to publicly lobby for the reinstitution of the 1997 constitution (REF A).

OPPOSITION PRESSURE: CENSURE DEBATE AND PROTESTS

¶12. (SBU) The cabinet reshuffle was expected in advance of the opposition Puea Thai's promise to file a censure motion against the Abhisit government after parliament reconvenes on January 21. Nuttawuth Prasertsuwan from Chart Thai Pattana and the Democrat Party's Nipphon Bunyamanee both told us that reshuffling the cabinet before Puea Thai filed the censure motion could strengthen support for the coalition before the contentious grilling that a censure debate would almost certainly entail, since Wittaya was sure to be a central target. On the other hand, Voravuth Silapa-archa, CTP strongman Banharn Silapa-archa's son, told us that the censure vote nevertheless still represented a big risk for Abhisit and that coalition partners would make significant demands of the government in order to stay on board.

¶13. (SBU) At the same time the Abhsit administration must navigate its way through the looming censure debate, it must simultaneously prepare for the next wave of red shirt demonstrations. The United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD, or "red-shirts") announced their intent to

resume protests in January, with the stated goal of bringing down the Abhisit government. Red-shirts planned to kickoff the effort January 11 by holding a demonstration in Khao Yai National Park near a home in the park belonging to Privy Councilor and former Prime Minister Surayut Chulanon. UDD leaders said they would use force if they were prevented from carrying out their protest. Red-shirt leaders also announced they would meet on January 15 to finalize plans for protests in Bangkok, which they claimed would attract a million supporters and lead to the dissolution of the government "within seven days." The final date has not yet been set, but red-shirt leader Jaran told us in December to expect February to be the "hottest month."

JOHN